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THE HIGH COST OF FOOD.

LEON A. CONGDON.

OF great importance to the people of this country is the high cost of food. It is common knowledge that the retail price which we pay for fuel energy and bodily growth is steadily advancing. This has not come about in the last year or two, as so many would have us believe, basing their claims on retail prices for the past four years. It is true that the fifteen principal articles of food alone have increased one-seventh in the last four years. The fifteen foods to which reference is made are sirloin steak, round steak, rib roast, pork chops, smoked bacon, smoked ham, lard, eggs, butter, milk, wheat flour, corn meal, Irish potatoes, and sugar.

It has been estimated that, starting with 100 as the basis for 1912, the percentage for 1916 was 114, or an increase of 14 per cent in the cost of these combined foodstuffs in the four years just passed. The figures for the various foods in question in 1916 were: Sirloin steak, 120; round steak, 128; rib roast, 115; pork chops, 121; smoked bacon, 119; smoked ham, 120; lard, 116; eggs, 113; butter, 109; milk, 103; wheat flour, 107; corn meal, 104; Irish potatoes, 98; and sugar, 138. It will be seen that the greatest increases have been in the meats and in sugar, while in the case of Irish potatoes there was a slight decrease in cost in the early part of 1916, and an enormous increase in the latter part of 1916.

To any one who has been studying the subject of the high cost of food, these figures do not tell the whole story. The more one gets into the subject the less he seems to know as to the real cause of these prices. The speaker has obtained from a large number of sources the retail price of the fifteen principal articles of food for the past twenty-seven years. The most reliable sources found were government statistics. From 1890 to 1896, inclusive, a period of the first seven years of these twenty-seven, the tendency of the retail food prices was to go down, as shown by the curve in the accompanying chart. In fact, retail prices of foodstuffs were lowest in 1896. Then a change took place, and for the twenty years prices of foodstuffs have had a tendency to increase, the year 1916 showing the high-water price mark of the principal foodstuffs.

In 1916, with flour selling at prices higher than at any time since the Civil War; with potatoes far beyond the reach of the poorer classes, and meat prices being paid producers of meat animals showing almost 24 percent over what was paid for 1915; with butter, eggs and cheese all selling at higher prices than they were in 1915; beans with an increase of more than 70 percent over 1915, and onions more than 50 percent higher and cabbages more than 40 percent advance, we find the people alarmed, especially the masses who earn a small wage. Why was not something done fifteen years ago when prices began to advance above normal? You can see the advance in foodstuffs is not new, but a sudden jump in necessities called forth a challenge, and hence every department of the federal government is making an investigation which should have been made years ago.

Is it any wonder that most people are aroused at the present time? Staple foods such as butter, eggs and cheese have in 1916 advanced nearly 50 percent in price on the Chicago market, according to reports received in October, 1916, from dealers in provisions, and even greater increases are shown in the price of potatoes, cabbage and onions. Potatoes advanced from 48 cents a bushel to \$1.45; cabbage sold for \$3 a barrel as against 65 cents a year ago. Onions that sold in 1915 for 60 cents a sack brought \$1.35. Flour increased more than 60 percent in 1916 over the year 1915 in October. Extras in creamery butter sold at from 38 to 40 cents a pound as against 27 cents a years ago for the same grade. Eggs retailed around 35 cents a dozen, the same classification selling a year ago at 23½ to 24 cents. Cheese dealers reported American cheese selling at 20 to 21½ cents a pound against 13¼ to 14½ cents a year ago. Other food products showed as much or more appreciation in value.

Food prices were comparatively abnormal and high in 1914 and 1915. Let us look at the crop production of 1914. The wheat crop of 1914 established in the United States record of 891,000,000 bushels, and was 128,000,000 bushels larger than any other year. The corn crop of 1914 was 2,673,000,000 bushels, and exceeded 1913 by 226,000,000 bushels. The potato crop for 1914 was 406,000,000 bushels, and was second in size in the history of the government and was 74,000,000 bushels larger than in 1913. The oat crop in 1914 was 1,141,000,000 bushels, and was third largest on record.

The domestic agricultural exports ending the fiscal year June 30, 1915 (the first year of the European War), were \$1,470,000,000, an increase of 32 percent over those of the preceding year, or nearly 42 percent over the average of the five years 1910-1914. The exports during the first year of the European war, as regards food products, increased over the preceding year on such products as meats and dairy products from \$146,000,000 to \$220,000,000, wheat and wheat flour from \$142,000,000 to \$428,000,000, corn and corn meal from \$7,000,000 to \$39,000,000, oats from \$1,000,000 to \$57,000,000 and barley from \$4,000,000 to \$18,000,000.

The exports of wheat and wheat flour represented about 37 percent of the crop of 1914, the usual exportation being less than 20 percent. Farmers received an average of 79 cents a bushel for 1913 crop and \$1.01 for that of 1914—an increase of 22 cents a bushel, or an aggregate gain of approximately \$196,000,000.

There is said by some investigators of the high cost of food that there was a shortage of crops in this country during 1916, and that this is in part due to the high cost of food for that year. However that may be, government statistics given out recently show that the farmers of this country evidently boosted the prices. The value of corn raised in the United States in 1915 was \$1,722,000,000; in 1916 it was \$2,295,000,000. The value of 1915 wheat crop was \$942,000,000; in 1916 it was \$1,025,000,000. The 1915 oat crop was 559 millions; in 1916 it was \$1,025,000,000. The 1915 barley crop was worth 118 millions of dollars; 1916 crop equalled 159 millions. The 1915 rye crop valued 45 millions; 1916 crop, 57 millions. The rice crop, 26 millions in 1915; in 1916, 37 millions. The 1915 potato crop was valued at 221 millions of dollars; 1916 crop, 417 millions. Sweet potatoes, 1915 crop, 46 millions; 1916 crop, 60 millions of dollars. Beans, valued at 26 millions in 1915, increased to 44 millions of dollars in 1916.

Let us take a review of the ten years from 1890 to 1899, inclusive. In these years we are not hampered by excessive domestic exports to war-ridden countries, nor do we have biased prices due to so-called investigators. The deductions are taken from the government statistics made before people clamored for an investigation. The average crop production for these ten years from 1890 to 1899 was in the case of wheat, for

example, 514,200,800 bushels in the United States. The average high price per bushel the following May in Chicago from 1890 to 1899 was 91.34 cents for wheat. The average domestic export from 1890 to 1899 was 173,044,583 bushels. In 1890, 1893, 1894, 1895 and 1896 both the production and domestic export were lower than the average for the ten years in question, but the highest price received per bushel above the average highest price at Chicago the following month of May was only found in the years 1890 and 1896. In the years of 1891, 1892, 1898 and 1899 we had simultaneously higher production and higher domestic export of wheat and flour than the average for this ten-year period, but the price per bushel paid in Chicago was lower than the average paid for this ten-year period. In 1897 we had higher production and higher domestic export of wheat and flour than the ten-year average; but contrary to what was expected, we had higher price per bushel paid at Chicago than the year average high price per bushel. In fact, the highest cash price paid for wheat in the Chicago market was in 1897, between the years of 1866 to 1914.

Probably the meat question is altogether the most important material problem with which the average family must deal in maintaining, for its every member, the fund of strength necessary to keep in the best working condition. There is probably no other problem of household economy or of individual maintenance that is so little understood by the average person as what makes the price of meat. We know the price of meat is high; in fact, so high as to be nearly prohibitive to the poorer classes. Even the packer of meat realized this when he said that a market condition that encourages the livestock grower to produce heavily and the consumer to eat generously spells volume of traffic, and volume of business at a small profit is a distinctive feature. He goes on to say that a market of this kind means a satisfied producer on the range, the farm, and the feedlot, and a contented consumer in city, town and country—everywhere.

The higher development of waste saving and the utilization of by-products in the packing plant depend upon volume. Perhaps the packer of meat is honest in his convictions, but he does not explain the millions of cattle, calves, sheep, lambs and hogs at the present time in hundreds of cold-storage plants. It is true that it takes two or three years to produce a steer and

almost a year to turn out a hog; but this is in the growing stage on the farm or range, and not necessary for the material to be kept in cold storage for that length of time. The spring of the year is a season of scarcity in the market in cattle, and sheep and hogs are scarce in the market in the autumn. Then meat takes another leap in the price. Markets in the packing business are busy in the fall when the ranges pour out their cattle and sheep and the winter brings the big run of hogs.

There is a difference in the prices of live cattle and dressed beef. The dressed-beef price is lower than the live-cattle price per pound because of the big profit in by-products and waste saving by the packer.

The real cause or causes of the high cost of foodstuffs has not been definitely determined. Some blame the housewife for her carelessness in buying and the inefficient and wasteful methods used in the home; others put the blame on the middle-man's or commission man's profits; some go higher up the scale and point to trusts or monopolies; others say it is due to the storing of the food necessities in large quantities, either in cold-storage plants and warehouses or in the case of cereals in the terminal elevators or private elevators on the farm, there to await larger prices. There is, perhaps, no one particular cause, and there is no doubt that all these causes and others not mentioned contribute toward the high cost of the food supply. We must not forget that as civilization advances we have a higher standard of living. This together with the so-called "gambling" in the leading stock exchange markets of the country tend to inflate prices. Did you not notice recently how the price of wheat dropped on the market when it was thought that the European War was about to come to a termination?

There are many minor causes for increase in food cost. It is estimated that the delivery of goods adds 8 percent to the cost. The heavy export of foodstuffs to Europe and the alleged shortage of crops in this country tend to make temporary increase in food cost, but this does not explain the gradual increase of the cost of food for the past twenty-seven years.

In these times of high prices the consumer, except the more wealthy, must needs substitute cheaper foods for the more expensive. The housewife must be taught how to buy her food

for the home. It is likewise necessary that she be careful to utilize all wastes that she usually throws out. A large number of housewives throw out of the back door much useful material that can be made into nutritious and appetizing food material for the table. The occasional substitution of rice and corn for the more expensive wheat and potato, and the occasional substitution of fish and milk for the more expensive meat, will bring down the grocery bill and will not impair your health.

FOOD AND DRUG LABORATORIES,
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